Challenged Elites - Elites as Challengers: Towards a Unified Theory of Representative Elites

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Heinrich Best & Ursula Hoffmann-Lange[*]

Abstract: *»Aktuelle Herausforderungen für etablierte Eliten – Neue Eliten als Herausforderer. Bausteine einer umfassenden Theorie repräsentativer Eliten«.* This HSR Special Issue assembles contributions on current topics of elite research. They deal in particular with the challenges globalization poses for the traditional linkages between citizens and their representatives and their impact on political legitimacy. We argue that these developments upset the balance between a broad elite consensus embracing universal values and citizens' fears that their representatives pay too little attention to their demands to fight the negative effects of globalization on the country. We develop a unified theory of representative elites by combining three theorems: The theorem of antagonistic cooperation, the principal-agent theorem and the challenge-response theorem. While the first explains how elite consensus ensures effective policy making, the second demands responsiveness to citizen demands, and the third implies that fundamental social and political changes produce strains for established intra-elite and elite-citizen relations.

Keywords: Elite consensus, antagonistic cooperation, principal-agent theorem, elite responsivity, representation, globalization, challenge-response theorem, political protest.

Research on elites, and particularly on political elites, has increased dramatically during the past thirty years. There were several reasons for this development, but the Third Wave of democratization played a particular role in reinvigorating interest in the subject. This was partly due to the fact that many observers considered conflicts within the elites of the preceding authoritarian regimes as a major factor in transitions to democracy, partly to the assumption that the mode of transition and the degree of elite replacement after democratization are indicative of the chances for democratic consolidation (Higley and Lengyel 2000). Since the 1990s, a large number of empirical studies have documented

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Historical Social Research 43 (2018) 4, 7-32 | published by GESIS
DOI: 10.12759/hsr.43.2018.4.7-32

such elite change, especially in post-communist countries (e.g. Szelényi and Szelényi 1995; Best and Becker 1997; Higley, Pakulski and Wesołowski 1998; Best, Gebauer and Salheiser 2012). Another expanding field of elite research that has triggered considerable attention in recent years was the emergence of transnational elites (e.g. Jönsson and Tallberg 2010; Hoffmann-Lange 2012; Best, Lengyel and Verzichelli 2012).

Efforts to establish elite research institutionally have also thrived. The International Political Science Association's –'IPSA' Research Committee on Political Elites, founded in 1971, has organized an ever larger number of panels at the past IPSA congresses and has provided the platform for the publication of the Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites (Best and Higley 2018). Moreover, in 2015, the European Consortium for Political Research – ECPR established a Standing Group 'Elites and Political Leadership' in order to invigorate a network of scholars working in the field of elite theory and empirical elite research.

This special issue of *Historical Social Research* explores new territories of elite theory and research by presenting recent and ongoing debates in this field. It comprises twelve original contributions: five of these were selected from presentations at the 24th International Congress of Political Science in Poznań (July 23-27, 2016)[1] and six are contributions from members of the comparative study on "Support for Democracy. Citizens and their Representatives in Times of Crisis", some of which were first also presented at the Poznań conference. The latter set of contributions studies the impact of the global economic crisis on support for democracy and political legitimacy in two old and five new democracies and will be introduced by a chapter of Klingemann and Hoffmann-Lange, providing background information on the theoretical focus and the data used by that comparative project. The themes linking all the contributions assembled in this special issue are the increasingly challenged status of elites under the premises of globalization, what their own contribution is to eliciting these challenges, and what their responses are to them.

The subject of elites' vulnerability, resilience and response is taken on by *Maurizio Cotta* with special emphasis on the effect accountability to national electorates (or the lack of it) had on how different segments of the European Elite System responded to the great recession after 2008. Elites' resilience and control is also in the focus of the contribution by *Farida Jalalzai and Meg Rincker*, who examine in a worldwide perspective the relevance of family ties for the recruitment of chief executives. *Elena Semenova* attributes recent changes in German corporate recruitment and networks to an increasing inte-

[1] The contribution by Gulbrandsen was originally presented at a conference on elites organized by Lengyel in Budapest in May 2017. The present introduction draws some inspiration from the discussions at the 'Roundtable on Elite Theory' at the 25th Congress of Political Science in Brisbane, July 24, 2018.

gration of the German economy in European and global markets. *Jérôme Heurtaux* shows what happens to the political elite after the collapse of an authoritarian regime and which paths are followed to reintegrate the political class after transition to democracy. *Trygve Gulbrandsen* shows why, how and with what consequences the political elites of Nordic countries have managed to uphold high levels of employment and welfare state benefits in their countries after the international financial crisis. *Oxana Gaman-Golutvina* shows how in the beginning of the 21st century the US-American political elite attempted to consolidate the normative and institutional bases for its global leadership. The contributions in both parts of this special issue open up a global perspective on the massive challenges elites face at the beginning of the 21st century and they give us clues about how and why elites succeed or failed to respond to them. They also provide valuable evidence for our attempt at integrating disjoined elements of elite theory.

1. The Shifting Focus of Elite Research

Empirical research on social backgrounds, careers and elite circulation has a long tradition, going back to the classic works of Pareto and Mosca. A wealth of cross-sectional as well as longitudinal studies based on available documentations such as parliamentary handbooks or other rosters of prominent individuals, constitutes a broad data base on both historical and contemporary elites and allows to analyzing elite change over time (Best and Cotta 2000a; Cotta and Best 2007). The advent of survey research opened up the additional opportunity to collect data on the subjective orientations of elites. Numerous surveys of sectoral elites (primarily political elites) have been conducted, while comprehensive surveys including a range of important elite sectors (politics, business, public administration, voluntary associations, media etc.) and internationally comparative surveys have been rarer because they are much more expensive (Aberbach et al. 2001; Hoffmann-Lange 2007; Best et al. 2012; Gulbrandsen 2018a). Studies of elite networks, finally, have mostly been limited to the community level where the number of relevant elite actors is much smaller. However, novel methods of data gathering and data analysis have increasingly opened up opportunities to study elite networks at the national level (Keller 2018).

The dramatic social and political changes of the past decades have not failed to have a deep impact on elite structures and elite behaviors (Best and Higley 2018; Vogel et al. 2019). Incumbency of political leadership positions has declined over the past decades, in first instance because of numerous regime changes, but also due to an increasing number of changes in government especially in European democracies. Lack of success in coping with political crises or moral wrongdoings (e.g. corruption) that used to be tolerated as minor trans-

gressions, are punished more easily by voters and party leaders. This cannot only be observed in politics where poor government performance is normatively expected to result in electoral defeat. Dismissals for insufficient performance or lack of success have become routine in many other sectors as well (Naím 2013), most notably in business corporations if CEOs fail to achieve higher profits and shareholder values.

Conversely, changes in recruitment patterns due to demographic and value change have opened up recruitment opportunities for members of groups that were traditionally excluded from access to elite positions, such as women, immigrants and members of ethnic or religious minorities. Although the massive expansion of higher education has not abolished inequalities in educational opportunities for children from lower class families, it nevertheless has led to a rise in the number of young people with a university degree joining the large pool of future elites (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff 2018). Moreover, the increased rotation in elite positions can be assumed to have increased the chances of aspirants for elite positions with unconventional backgrounds since the recruitment of new incumbents is no longer perceived as necessarily involving long-term consequences.

Finally, while split-ups, mergers and failures have decreased the ranks of traditional political parties and other powerful organizations, startup companies, new media, NGOs, economic and political consultants, as well as new political parties have mushroomed and have become powerful enough to successfully compete for political influence. The latter are not bound by traditional loyalties to other organizations and therefore constitute challengers more prone to eroding traditional norms of cooperation and competition.

The traditional model of representative democracy as portrayed by Michels, Schumpeter and others involved a steep gradient between political elites, a relatively small political stratum of political activists and the bulk of ordinary citizens whose political role was closely circumscribed, largely limited to that of political observer and voter. The landmark study on political culture conducted by Almond and Verba in 1958 revealed that the political attitudes and political actions of the citizens in the United States and Britain largely conformed to that normative model. The authors characterized this *civic culture* as a "balanced political culture in which political activity, involvement and rationality exist but are balanced by passivity, traditionality, and commitment to parochial values" (1989, 30). Likewise, Converse' analysis of the political attitudes of Americans (1964 and 2000) studied at about the same time and later updated with more recent data, confirmed that the great majority of them displayed a relatively low level of political sophistication, while only a small segment of about ten percent could be considered to have a differentiated and internally consistent understanding of political events and issues.

The politically quiet post World War II years, when the Western democracies were preoccupied with overcoming the devastations of the war, came to an

end in the late 1960s with the sudden and unexpected outburst of political protest among students. While it started out as a protest against the Vietnam War, it soon developed into a more fundamental opposition against the monopoly of the established elites to determine policies and the slim chances of ordinary voters to change the course of events. The '*Political Action Study*', a five-nation survey conducted in 1974, confirmed the emergence of new modes of political activism and a mobilization of citizens outside of the traditional political parties and intermediary associations. A majority of the respondents in four of the five countries considered lawful direct political actions such as demonstrations and petitions as a legitimate way to articulate their disapproval with government policies (Barnes, Kaase et al. 1979).

In the more than 40 years that have passed since the publication of that study, the share of citizens in post-industrial democracies who participate in direct political action has increased at a breathtaking pace (Dalton 2006, 68). Ample empirical evidence also confirms that institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of citizen participation are complementary. Active citizens tend to use the entire range of available options to feed their political preferences into the political system by voting, working within political parties, but also by trying to influence policy decisions through different forms of direct action. Thus, the experience of the inter-war period when political protest frequently was used by anti-democratic movements to express fundamental dissatisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system – more often than not in combination with a rejection of democratic values and principles –, is no longer valid for understanding today's protest movements most of which demand more, not less democracy.

As many observers have pointed out, this increase in political activism can be attributed primarily to educational expansion. However, while Inglehart and others have claimed that rising educational levels, in conjunction with the spread of mass media (especially the internet), have promoted an increase in political sophistication (Inglehart and Welzel 2005, 28; Dalton 2006, 25), politics has remained a sphere to which most people devote little time. Likewise, a deeper understanding of the complexities of politics and regular political involvement is still the preserve of a relatively small segment of the population. Moreover, political interest has not risen proportionally to the increase in educational levels.

Nie et al.'s (1996) study of the relationship between education and democratic citizenship tried to unravel this paradox. The authors distinguished two analytically distinct aspects of democratic citizenship: democratic enlightenment and political engagement. Democratic enlightenment involves knowledge of the principles of democracy and a commitment to democratic values and tolerance. "Political engagement, on the other hand, signifies the capability of citizens to pursue their preferences in politics and is characterized by attributes

such as participation in difficult political activities and knowledge of leaders." (Nie et al. 1996, 37)

Both aspects of democratic citizenship are related to formal education, but they follow a different logic. Political engagement does not only depend on education, but also on interest in politics and a person's subjective ability to influence political developments. It requires additional cultural and social capital as well as opportunity which are in short supply. It follows what the authors called the *relative education model*. Therefore, rising educational levels have not automatically led to a comparable increase in political engagement. Democratic enlightenment, in contrast, is a personal attribute that follows the *absolute education model* and is responsible for an increase in support for democratic values (Nie et al. 1996, 122).

The study provides a pertinent explanation for the impact of formal education on value orientations and political participation patterns in modern democracies. The absolute education model explains why rising educational levels have contributed to a spread of pro-democratic values, lower trust in politicians, and an increased readiness to contribute money and to take to the streets for 'good' political causes. Most of the latter activities, however, are intermittent and limited to influencing specific issues. This conclusion is supported by the fact that today both established and new organizations have problems recruiting and retaining members: While demonstrations may draw large crowds, the organizational work behind the scenes is provided by a relatively small core of activists.

The combined impact of these ongoing political developments can be gauged by looking at the elections of the last decade in 31 European democracies (Hoffmann-Lange and Kuklys 2019, 63-9). Between 2008 and 2017, a total of 68 legislative elections were held in the 31 countries. Excluding Norway and Switzerland that have fixed legislative terms, one-third of these elections were held ahead of schedule after a break-up of the previous government. Moreover, citizens have become more electorally mobile and do not hesitate to change their voting choice from one election to the next. Losses or gains of more than 10 percentage points for a party could be observed in 57.4% of the 68 European elections under study. It was highest in the post-communist democracies (73.1% of 26 elections). Studies of the long-term development of voter volatility in European democracies confirm a considerable increase of electoral volatility from fairly high electoral stability in the first 25 years after World War II to considerably higher levels in the mid-2010s (Drummond 2006; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2015).

The declining reliance of citizens on traditional mass organizations has, in turn, also resulted in a decline in membership that has especially affected political parties and labor unions (Putnam 2000), although this decline has been more than compensated for by the proliferation of advocacy groups and initiatives promoting social and political causes, ranging from loosely structured

local groups to national and even global movements. At the same time, however, these new groups and initiatives are organizationally less institutionalized and more ephemeral.

Electoral volatility inevitably decreases the incumbency of parliamentarians and governments. Between 2008 and 2017, a total of 95 changes in government took place in the 31 European democracies, on average more than three per year. Many of these changes took place during the legislative term without leading to a new election. Changes in government were especially frequent in the eleven post-communist democracies, altogether 44 in the eight years between 2008 and 2017, on average 5.5 per year. The electoral success of new parties is another indicator of an increasingly mobile electorate. In the 68 elections under study, 59 new parties were able to gain first-time parliamentary representation. Some of them even managed to achieve a substantial share of the total vote. New parties have been particularly successful in the post-communist and the Southern European democracies. The party systems of the established democracies have been more stable in this respect, but even here eight new parties appeared on the scene from 2009 to 2016, including the PVV (Wilders), the True Fins and the Sweden Democrats. In the German Bundestag elections of 2017, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) gained 12.6% of the total vote. *La Republique en Marche's* appearance in the 2017 election for the French Assemblée Nationale was certainly the most spectacular in this group of countries. The party received 28.2% of the votes in the first round and a staggering 43.1% in the second round of the elections, which was enough for winning a majority of the seats.

Many of the new parties that have appeared on the scene are not just new, but also different. There is near unanimous agreement among social scientists that the last decades have not only seen a decline in party identification and in support for established parties, but also a rise of populist movements, parties and political leaders (for example Inglehart and Norris 2016; Inglehart 2017; Cox 2017; Self and Hicken 2018).[2] The perceived academic importance of that phenomenon has even warranted the publication of a handbook of populism (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). There is wide agreement that populism is characterized by an anti-elite stance directed against established parties and policies and an emphasis on giving power (back) to the ordinary people. The literature deals mostly with right-wing populism, assuming that populism is critical of globalization and emphasizes the importance of an ethnic and cultural homogeneity of nations (Mudde 2008; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). This goes hand in hand with hostility against globalization and rejection of transnational institutions (UN, NATO or the EU). While the number of successful right-wing populist

[2] FEPS – Foundation for European Progressive Studies publishes regular reports on electoral support for European populist parties and their participation in governments (Boros et al. 2017).

parties is much larger, there is, however, also populism on the left, for instances Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain and the Cinque Stelle in Italy.

2. Towards a Unified Theory of Representative Elites

The shifting focus of research on elites in representative democracies coincided with the development of a set of theorems collectively and commonly referred to as the *Theory of Democratic Elitism*. This term was coined by Peter Bachrach in his book with the same name (Bachrach 1967). It included a scathing review of current elite theory, which – so Bachrach claimed – focused exclusively on elite integration and seemed to assume that the *masses* were largely irrelevant for politics. This preoccupation of elite theory with elite integration started from the assumption of classic elite theory that complex societies require collective decision-making institutions to make binding decisions and to allocate the power necessary for the enforcement of those decisions, thereby assigning political leadership a central role.

Meanwhile, modern elite theory has acknowledged the crucial importance of citizens in today's democracies. It has moved away from its previous preoccupation with elite structures and has increasingly taken into account elite-citizen relations. This shift acknowledges that democratic political elites act as representatives of social groups and that they cannot be adequately studied without simultaneously taking into consideration social structure and the behavior of the populace (e.g. Best and Higley 2010). These considerations denote the degree of *elite integration* and the quality of *elite-citizen linkages* as equally central elements of the theory of democratic elitism. Elite integration is the prerequisite for effective collective decision-making and requires cooperative relations among the elites involved in these decisions. Conversely, elite-citizen linkages imply that political elites act as representatives of the groups of citizens who have entrusted them with the power to represent their interests (Hoffmann-Lange 2018). It is obvious that a high degree of elite integration and the representation of group interests cannot be maximized simultaneously. The set of propositions constituting the *theory of democratic elitism* has, however, never been formalized nor systematically integrated into a unified theory of representative elites.

Accordingly, a recent publication has stated that "theorizing has not kept pace with the collection of more diversified and rich empirical data about political elites" and that there is "no general and accepted theory that drives studies today, and its absence is a main challenge" (Best and Higley 2018, 5). Our suggestion is, therefore, to merge three theorems to form what we see as an outline of a more comprehensive theory of representative elites: the antagonistic cooperation theorem, which addresses insider-insider relations at elite level; the principal-agent theorem, which addresses insider-outsider relations between

elites and their constituents; and the challenge-response theorem, which addresses the causes and course of elite change.[3] All three theorems are affected and, in one way or another, challenged by what is seen by many observers as the present 'crisis' of representative democracy. In the following, we will demonstrate how a linkage of the three theorems provides a good explanation for what caused and what happens in this crisis.

The theorem of 'antagonistic cooperation' explains why and how political elites cooperate and limit their conflicts in power competitions. The term was coined by the early American sociologist William G. Sumner (Best 2009) to denote how adversaries may enter into limited but durable partnerships in order to pursue common interests and maintain a mutually beneficial social order. Antagonistic cooperation leads to association, but cannot be equated with complete social integration, because the conflicting partners do not abandon their antagonistic positions in social and political controversies. At an early stage of their cooperation their actions are governed by the logic of the prisoners' dilemma, i.e. to renounce large but short term gains from confrontations for the prospect to profit from smaller but durable gains from long term cooperation. The decisive premise is here '*durable*', because cooperation is fragile and prone to collapse if crucial parameters change and particularly if an endgame constellation occurs. To make cooperation durable, it needs formal institutions and informal norms that sanction defection. If antagonistic cooperation is successfully maintained over an extended period of time, mutual trust will emerge between the parties involved and will further enhance their bonds.

In a 2009 article in Comparative Sociology, the application of an amended version of the theorem of antagonistic cooperation to representative elites and their political competition was proposed (Best 2009). Indeed, the concept seems to be particularly useful to describe and explain processes of elite integration and especially for understanding representative elite behaviors related to self-privilege, self-preservation and self-empowerment. An overarching normative consensus over fundamental principles of pluralist democracy is, however, a necessary complement of elites' antagonistic cooperation because it legitimizes the institutions that sustain it, confirms the elite status of the actors involved, fixes the rules of the game, moderates the conflicts between elite factions and sanctions non-compliance. Normative integration is also a means to address the free-rider problem of factions of elites who are not cooperating while profiting from the cooperation of others.

The consensus emerging from antagonistic cooperation enables elites to moderate conflicts in societies at large, whereas divided elites are prone to

[3] The theoretical propositions outlined in this part of the introduction have been introduced in a series of earlier publications. See here also references to the relevant literature: Best et al. 2000; Best 2007; Best 2009; Best 2010; Best 2018c; Best and Vogel 2012a and b; Best and Vogel 2014; Best and Semenova 2015; Best and Vogel 2018a; Vogel et al. 2018.

intensify or even create societal conflicts. The conflict intensity within cooperating elites is converging towards a balance point where the advantages of cooperation are offset against the disadvantages resulting from their restraint of political competition. These disadvantages overwhelmingly originate from supporters and voters who feel estranged from their cooperating representatives and cut off from processes of political decision making and their outcomes.

While an amended concept of antagonistic cooperation helps to explain why and under what conditions conflicting elite groups will provide effective leadership and adhere to rules for political competition and power transfers, it has been suggested that an amended version of the principal-agent theorem may be used to understand problems inherent in relations between representative elites and ordinary citizens (Strøm et al 2006; Best 2010). When applied to representative democracies, principal-agent theory depicts electorates as principals that commission agents, i.e. political elites, to act on their behalf. The insider-outsider relation established here is, however, characterized by a massive asymmetry: the agents, i.e. the elites, enjoy a far wider latitude of action and are much better informed than their principals, i.e. their electorates and selectorates. They also pursue their own interests, and are intent on increasing their agency, their security and the resources at their disposal, while principals, i.e. citizens, expect accountability, responsiveness and providence from their agents. Citizens and selectorates make use of (de-)selecting and (de-)electing their representative when they want to sanction or reward them for their behavior and their performance. We therefore suggest conceiving the asymmetrical relations between representative elites and ordinary citizens as a manifestation of *antagonistic representation*.

As in antagonistic cooperation, there is a balancing point in principal-agent relations when agency – i.e. the aptitude of elites to provide successful leadership – is offset against their accountability and responsiveness. However, the balancing points of antagonistic cooperation and of the principal-agent relation differ systematically because, by trading with the political adversary, representatives have to routinely ignore some concerns of their constituents. This situation can be tolerated by citizens and managed by elites if the issues at stake are of limited salience and if relations between constituencies and 'their' representatives are still shrouded by deference and trust. If, however, both balancing points are moving too far apart, either antagonistic cooperation or the principal-agent relation, or both, will be in jeopardy of breaking down. In such a situation, every possible line of conduct is problematic: elites can either abandon their common balancing point of antagonistic cooperation and adapt to the preferences of their constituents or they can uphold their antagonistic cooperation and lose the support of their constituents. Voters can either choose the 'exit' option and become non-voters or they can choose the 'voice' option and support outsiders and counter-elites (Hirschman 1970). They will opt for voice, i.e. for alternative agents who are at the fringes or outside the circle of cooper-

ating antagonists, if a highly salient issue is not or is not expected to be tackled by established representative elites. With regard to elites, mobilization for and representation related to non-consensual positions will break up the consensus of established representative elites. This is because newcomers enter the elite who are not committed to the norms and practices underlying elite consensus, while some established elites will abandon the consensus to compete with outsiders and insiders on a non-consensual platform.

These developments will have long lasting consequences and will lead to a change of the elite setting from a consensual to a conflictual mode by permanently transforming the structure of opportunities for political competition and by shattering the normative basis of elite consensus: universalistic humanitarian norms are at risk of being abandoned in favor of particularistic solidarity norms, thereby favoring communities of insiders – nationally, ethnically, culturally or socio-economically – over humanity at large (Higley 2016). If and when this abandonment happens, the communality, which has overarched socio-economic or ideological cleavages and international conflicts within and between countries for many decades, will be surrendered. This would lead to a deep crisis of representative democracy, brought about, not by an economic depression or by social upheaval, but by internal contradictions emanating from relations within representative elites, and between representative elites and their constituents. To avoid this crisis, an adequate response that satisfies both the needs of elite consensus and of elites' responsiveness has to be found.

These considerations touch fundamental assumptions of the 'neo'- and 'demo-elitisms' (Körösényi 2018). An elites-population gap inevitably results from elite consensus and elite integration and this elites-population gap tends to break up elite consensus. This is because it creates opportunities for outsiders and counter-elites to enter the ranks of the top-players. This means that instead of solidifying the bases of representative democracies, an unrestrained consensus occurs that risks impairing the responsiveness of representative elites and thereby representation itself. In this process, the population is not a mere soundboard, but an active player, a potential agent of change who poses new challenges, offers new opportunities and throws up new contenders. The popular pressure for change may evolve without the coordinating involvement of elites, because coordination is unnecessary for the production of uniform behavior in large parts of the population and for the development of new and possibly hostile environments for established elites. Reproductive behavior, migration and mass consumption are cases of uncoordinated, but aggregated mass behaviors which do not qualify for collective action, but may nevertheless develop into massive challenges for political elites. The refugee crisis of 1989, which brought down the communist rule in the GDR, is an example of the fatal damage such developments can do to an established elite system.

Both, elite research and elite theory, should therefore consider uncoordinated mass behavior as one possible trigger of fundamental elite change.

Established elites may, however, also be challenged by coordinated collective action unleashed by counter-elites or by debilitating change within their own ranks, which impairs their ability to exercise their power and to control their reproduction. While elite systems are universal, the elite status of a specific group of people and the regimes of specific elite systems are inherently precarious. They have to be defended against challengers and adapted to changing environments.

In the case of European representative elites, these observations led to the suggestion that their patterns of long term change can be interpreted as responses to fundamental challenges confronting them roughly sequentially with state and nation building, industrialization and the emergence of mass democracy (Best et al. 2000, Best 2007). Representative elites' recruitment was conceptualized here as the outcome of complex interactions within and between party organizations or caucuses and the general electorate. These interactions are driven by the pressure of competition for the popular vote.[4] It manifested itself first in the process of nation building by an influx of 'symbol specialists' (like university professors) and specialists in the application of executive power (like administrative civil servants) as representative elites. In periods of accelerated industrialization, the share of economic elites typically increased. By the turn of the twentieth century, with the emergence of party based mass democracy, there was a significant influx in specialists in mass mobilization, such as trade union functionaries.

During the 1940s, there emerged what we identify as the 'consensus challenge', that is, the need to establish consensually unified polities and societies as a primary precondition for the defeat or containment first of Nazism and then of Communism, both of which were seen as deadly threats to western representative elites, whose status, values and the societal order they represented were at stake. The integration and the mediation of conflicts within and between western democracies were the order for the day. In the course of this development the public sector became the dominant occupational background among representative elites, a development grounded primarily in the loyalty of public servants to the established political order and their competence in redistributive welfare state politics. After the 1940s, we see also, on average, a decrease in turnover and an increase of incumbency to levels never previously attained (Best 2007; Best and Semenova 2015).

Corporate interest mediation, the extension of welfare state benefits, the establishment of catch-all parties and the propagation of concepts like 'open society', pluralist polities and market economy formed the bases and instruments for consensus creation at elite and general population levels. The roots of

[4] We refer here to the evidence DATACUBE, EurElite and EASE projects gathered between 1989 and 2018, covering the period between 1848 and the present (Best and Cotta 2000b; Best and Edinger 2006).

the universalistic values used to cement the consensus paradigm and to mobilize support for it, are found in the secular doctrines of the enlightenment. They first developed into the Wilsonian principles, which failed to be implemented after the First World War, and finally became canonized in the 1941 Atlantic Charter, the programmatic basis for the Anglo-American anti-Nazi alliance. Although there were always outsiders and antagonists who could not be incorporated in the anti-totalitarian alliance, the consensus paradigm formed a solid basis for elite co-operations within western democracies and their supranational alliances like NATO and the EU. In 1989/90 it seemed to have triumphed and become the foundation of a new world order (Fukuyama 1989). It became clear that a turning point had been reached when Edvard Shewardnadse, the Soviet Foreign Minister at that time, officially renounced the doctrine of international class struggle and embraced general humanitarian principles in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly.

The pre-1990 consensus was, however, a system mainly forged by fear. With the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and China's capitalist conversion, the single most important factor that had established and stabilized post-war western democracies disappeared. Almost immediately after these events, we see a sharp adjustment of systemic instability indicators, such as a decrease of western European representative elites' incumbency and an increase in turnover rates to the levels of the late 1940s and early 1950s (Best and Semenova 2015). We also see a decline of MPs who had their occupational background in the public service and therefore close ties to the existing constitutional order, sometimes enforced by an oath of allegiance. At a systemic level, the breakup of the Italian party system in the early 1990s, which resulted in the first Berlusconi Government (arguably the first right wing populist government in post-1945 Europe), the emergence of the Front National as a serious contender in French elections, the appearance of Le Pen père as a second round contender for the French presidency, the inclusion of Haider's FPÖ in an ÖVP-led Austrian Government, and the rejection of the draft of the European Constitution in several referenda, are further symptoms that it was not only in the post-communist East but also in 'old' western democracies that a new era had started in the 1990s and that western European democracies were facing a new challenge. It is significant that the cracks in the structure of western European political elites and the setting of western political systems started to appear immediately after the breakdown of eastern European communism and the transformation of Chinese communism.

We have interpreted these developments as manifestations of a '*legitimacy challenge'* that has emerged within the political systems of western democracies, rather than through the external confrontations that characterized the period of the consensus challenge (Best 2007). We relate this argument to Toynbee's theorem, which states that in facing external challenges, collective actors produce internal challenges that surface after these actors have prevailed

over their initial challengers (1946). These new internal challenges target elite quality, i.e. the ability of a representative democracy to produce efficient and accountable political elites. Institutional settings for elite recruitment, such as the cartel party based on arrangements between politicians to appropriate and share the resources of the state, might be suitable to meet a consensus challenge, thereby creating a consensual political elite united by common material interests. In the long run, however, this undermines the legitimacy of representative democracy, as the in-group/out-group differential would become too large to be justifiable by the achievements of the incumbents. The true nature of democracy is blurred if the competitive struggle for power is impeded. The emergence of the legitimacy challenge indicated that there can been more consensus in a consensual political elite than a consolidated democracy can endure. The closure of the political market through political professionalization and the pooling of interests between formally competing parties is an autocatalytic process that may jeopardize the workings of democracy (Best 2007).

3. Populism: A Case in Point

These developments, to use an adapted quote from the Communist Manifesto, called up 'the specter of populism' (Arditi 2004; Canovan 1999; Cox 2017; Fieschi 2018; Best 2018c). Among established representative elites of the West, this 'specter' evokes a sentiment of threat posed by political figures and movements who challenge the established norms, practices and organizational settings of Western democracies. Within the legal frameworks of existing institutions, these challengers introduce deviant institutional concepts and 'illegitimate' discourses into the mainstream politics of western elites. They thereby express a widespread discontent of citizens with the isolation and the outcomes of the politics of representative institutions. Populism manifests itself, inter alia, in a sharp rise of votes for populist parties, mainly right wing populist parties, and in attempts of established parties to (re-)define themselves by adopting populist stratagems. This discontent endured and grew in the period of economic recovery after the world financial crisis, even spreading into countries with relatively successful economies and settled societies, such as Switzerland, the Netherlands and the Nordic countries. It is also evident in Germany, which has experienced a very long period of economic growth and a sharp decline in unemployment, including East Germany, where there was mass unemployment until the beginning of the century. However, the results of surveys taken in mid-September 2018 show that, in Germany, support for the right wing populist *Alternative für Deutschland* had increased to 18 percent, surpassing that of the Social Democrats (Deutschland-Trend September 21, 2018).

It is – at least at first sight – paradoxical that even a (relatively) good economic performance and extensive welfare state systems have been unable to

protect established representative elites and their regimes of elite recruitment and reproduction against the onslaught of populist challengers with their aggressive anti-elitist rhetoric and agenda. It also raises the questions of why this is so and what impact might this development have on the future of representative democracy.

The most precise and convincing definition of populism has been given by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) who conceptualize populism as an ideational construct rather than a simple reflection of structural conditions. They see it as comprising perceptions and assumptions about socio-economic and political conditions, while at the same time being only a *thin-centered ideology*, in contrast to a full-blown ideology that provides an explanation of the nature of society and how it ought to be (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 7). As a thin-centered ideology, it needs to take its substantive focus and normative implications from other ideologies, which gives populists a great deal of flexibility in their choice of topics for political mobilization. The constitutive element of populism, however, is a Manichean distinction between the '*good people*' and the '*evil elite'*. As both terms are empty signifiers that can be applied to different groups of people, which allows populists to claim the right to speak for '*the people'*.

Populists also share a stylistic communality by openly rejecting traditional ways of doing politics and by being more aggressive in articulating their criticism of political adversaries. Huber and Schimpf have likened their appearance to a drunken guest "spilling out the painful truths" (2016, 119), meaning that populists point out the shortcomings of the established political actors, their neglect of important issues and their de-politicization of problems for which they have no solution. Such criticism is not only addressed to political elites but also to other important elites, particularly those pertaining to business and the media.

Populist movements concentrate on mobilizing dissatisfied voters by pointing out the deficiencies of politics and by blaming politicians as being responsible for all societal problems or at least for failing to tackle them successfully. This is especially true for their claim to represent the interests of the ordinary people whom they portray as suffering from the strains produced by globalization and immigration, which they blame on unfair economic practices by other countries or on governments that spend too much money on immigrants rather than taking care of their own people. While this suggests that they are concerned about the needy, Inglehart and Norris (2016) have pointed out that such claims have the main purpose of mobilizing voters who feel that social change is threatening traditional values and their way of life. The authors argue that support for populist authoritarian parties is "motivated by a backlash against the cultural changes linked with the rise of Postmaterialist and Self-expression values, far more than by economic factors" (2016, 446). They also assume that this backlash has an economic basis in the decline of real incomes, an increase

in the number of people with lower education holding precarious jobs, and the rise in economic inequality, particularly in high-income countries (2016, 448-9; see also Fuchs and Klingemann 2019).

In 2009/2010 a parallel representative survey amongst German representatives and the enfranchised population already showed a vast disparity in attitudes towards immigration from non-EU countries, in that representatives were overwhelmingly favorable and citizens unfavorable concerning immigration from EU-outsiders (Best and Vogel 2012a; Vogel 2019). This divide was particularly deep and amounted to misrepresentation between supporters and MPs of left-wing parties. It was shown that this gap was the result of a disaccord between universalistic values, prevalent amongst elites (favoring free movement in a globalized world) and particularistic norms, prevalent amongst citizens, who restrict solidarity to members of their own community (Best 2018 a and b; Fukuyama 2018). This disaccord became a driving force for welfare-state nativism and demands for the 'ethnicization' of Western welfare-state policies through citizenship-based restrictions concerning welfare payments. In Europe, the mobilization of social protectionism against immigrants was amplified by a resistance to the influx of ethno-culturally very different people from Islamic countries, which has increased massively since 2015 and fueled a rigorous rejection of refugees, particularly in eastern and central eastern Europe, including East Germany, where no Islamic communities had previously existed. In contrast, large parts of European political elites were and still are supporting policies of an inclusive multiculturalism with attempts at integrating distinct ethno-cultural communities into secularized societies under the auspices of universalistic norms. Both conflicts over the (re-)distribution of welfare benefits ('who gets what?') and identity policies ('who are we?') relate to what is now called 'the refugee crisis'.

However, even though salient differences in policy preferences between representatives and the represented are a necessary factor underpinning the rise of populist parties in representative democracies, they are not on their own a sufficient prerequisite for the trends observed. They must be complemented by differences in polity preferences; in this case, concerning the mistrust of large parts of the electorate in the established parties' willingness or ability to respond to its grievances. In the same 2009/2010 synoptic study of German representative elites and the general electorate, we found indeed clear indications that a deep disagreement existed between the majority of the population and the majority of their representatives concerning the functioning of representative institutions and the role of representatives: voters were expecting responsiveness of representatives to their demands, whereas the representatives cited their role as leaders and guides for the electorate (Best and Vogel, 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2018b; Vogel 2019). Again, this gap in polity preferences extended across the followers and representatives of all parliamentary parties present in the Bundestag at that time, even including Die LINKE, whose representatives

had shown the greatest openness towards a bottom-upwards mode of representation.

Accordingly, populism is the political response to the salient gap between citizens' and political elites' policy and polity preferences. It shifts the value basis from universalistic norms to particularistic norms, from concerns for humanity at large to those for national communities and one's own country – 'America', 'Italy' etc. first! This shift of focus is supported by the fact that constituencies are made up of nationals and can therefore exert powerful pressure to implementing nationalistic policies. Most voters have, in contrast to their representatives, a clear preference for the delegate over the trustee model of representation (Best and Vogel 2018a). By voting for populist parties, they are showing their parliamentary agents just who they see as the principal.

The theoretical discussion dealing with the relationship between populism and democracy is of immediate relevance for elite theory. It emphasizes the anti-elitist stance of populist movements and refers to the fact that populism exploits the ambivalent promises of democracy. In this vein, Canovan (1999) has argued that democracy involves both a *redemptive* and a *pragmatic* face. It promises to give power to the people and to achieve a better world by political action. But at the same time, it is a pragmatic way of governing based on a complex system of state institutions and rules that include regular elections, decisions by legislative majorities and a liberal constitution protecting individual liberties. Reducing politics to a pragmatic quest for effective government would, however, run the danger of inviting corruption by government officials:

> For many of those around the world who have to put up with civil war or violent repression, pragmatic democracy may seem supremely enviable. But to those who take its benefits for granted, democracy would not seem legitimate if there were nothing more to it than this. For democracy is also a repository of the aspirations characteristic of modern politics. Inherent in modern democracy, in tension with its pragmatic face, is faith in secular redemption: the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people. (Canovan 1999, 11)

Whenever the gap between the "haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics" becomes too wide, "populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party maneuvering the shining ideal of democracy renewed" (1999,11).[5]

Arditi (2004) complemented Canovan's analysis of populism by a discussion of its potentially problematic effects on the political system. He argued that populism can take three different forms that have different consequences.

[5] This is something liberal thinkers have not adequately reflected. They believe that rational appeals are sufficient for convincing people of the advantages of democracy. Dahrendorf (1997) has clearly seen this deficit of liberal democracy and acknowledged that democracy is a *cold project* that does not claim to appeal to the hearts and souls of the people. He hoped, however, that social linkages (*Ligaturen*) could make up for this.

The first is that the media take on the function of mavericks by constantly scrutinizing and criticizing government policies. A second form is populism as a "mode of participation that departs from the etiquette of political salons without apologizing for its brashness". These two forms have the effect to both disturbing and renewing the political process. The third form, however, "comes to haunt political democracy and to endanger the very framework in which it can function". This is when distrust for institutional procedures and the intricacies of the legislative process lead to "discretional adherence to the rule of law" and runs the danger to slip into authoritarian practices (2004, 142). The latter danger is the reason why Simon Tormey, who otherwise has severely criticized the deficiencies of representative democracy (2015), has argued that populism can be democracy's deadly cure (2017).[6]

A particular danger of populist movements for representative democracy lies in their claim to represent *the people*. This is based on the assumption that there is something like a monist will of the people, a predetermined 'common good a priori', which they claim to pursue. This implies a denial of the pluralist nature of society and of the existence of conflicting interests. It denies the necessity of what Fraenkel called a 'common good a posteriori', which can only be determined in a complex process of opinion formation that takes into account the diversity of different points of view (1991, 300). The claim to superior knowledge of what 'the people' really want implies an immunity to criticism, which may be denounced as being based on a false perception of the people's true will and can easily turn into an authoritarian or even totalitarian claim to power. The empirical analysis of Huber and Schimpf takes into account the Janus-faced character of populism. The authors assumed that populist parties can be beneficial by broadening the spectrum of issues debated in parliaments if they are in opposition, while they are apt to impair the quality of democracy if they participate in government (2016, 111). This hypothesis was confirmed in their analysis based on aggregate data[7] including European cabinets for the period 2000 to 2012.

The foregoing considerations have shown that populism is a phenomenon resulting from unfulfilled promises of democracy that is particularly likely to

[6] In his review of Chantal Mouffe's book 'For a *Left Populism*', Longo raised similar reservations about the potential dangers of left-wing populism.

[7] In addition to the participation of populist parties in government and opposition, they took into account a wide range of other independent variables, and used democratic quality as dependent variable. It should be noted, however, that the empirical basis of the study is not entirely satisfactory since only ten percent of all cabinets included populist parties during the period under study. Unfortunately, the authors also failed to supply sufficient documentation on the countries in which populist parties achieved cabinet status during this time. It can be assumed that this was mostly the case in post-communist democracies with only a few instances and short periods in established West European democracies, except for the SVP in Switzerland.

spread in times of rapid social change when established patterns of political crisis management are confronted with new challenges. Theoretically, it is the opposite of elitism. "Elitism shares populism' basic monist and Manichean distinction of society between a homogeneous 'good' and a homogeneous 'evil', but it holds an opposite view on the virtues of the groups" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 7). While a lot has been written about the causes of populism's rise in recent years, Moíses Naím has argued that it is not a new phenomenon at all, but rather "a strategy to obtain and retain power" by "exacerbating socio-cultural division and conflict" (2017). This strategy includes magnifying the nation's problems, criminalizing the opposition, discrediting experts and delegitimizing the media. Basically, Naím claims that populists are simply counter-elites vying for power. Their glorification of the simple people and their demands for more citizen influence is nothing but an empty promise to mobilize supporters into believing that they care about their problems. Similarly, Mudde (2008) has argued that it is not sufficient only to take into account the demand side of populism, but that we should also look at the supply side, implying that this is a vehicle which can be used by populists to mobilize on pre-existing grievances. Thus, the rise of populism in developed democracies is also attributable to the activities of political entrepreneurs.

Is the specter of populism therefore ringing the death bell for western liberal democracy? Recent survey results suggest a paradoxical answer to this question: in 2017 a survey in East Germany observed an increase of "satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in practice" to levels which had never before been seen: about two thirds of the respondents were satisfied (Best 2018). Although this high degree of satisfaction had slightly declined by 2018, a follow-up survey executed during the epic Merkel/Seehofer clash over border controls to bar immigrant from entering the country showed it to be still the third highest level since 2000. This increase in satisfaction with democracies' reality seems to coincide with an increasingly sympathetic response by established political elites to popular concerns about illegal immigration, as well as with a tightening of border controls, an application of stricter rules for asylum seekers, and serious attempts to send back immigrants who do not qualify for a protected status. The fact that populist parties had meanwhile established themselves as strong parliamentary players and even – in some European countries – as parties of government, can be also viewed as proof of systemic responsiveness of western representative democracy and its ability to integrate outsiders and counter-elites, in the given case, populists.

The integration of populists may – at least in the German case – be supported by the fact that the self-declared counter-elite of right-wing populists has a socio-demographic makeup which is very similar to the established representative elite, in particular those of its members who sit on the right of the Bundestag (Best and Vogel 2018b). Only their lack of previous incumbency in the Bundestag and their very low pre-mandate experience in holding political of-

fice at the local or regional level justify the qualification of AfD MPs to be considered as members of a counter-elite, even though such a lack is a defining characteristic of any newcomer party. All the other indicators show a solid anchoring of the AfD representatives in the traditional social and political order, however. We were particularly surprised by the fact that, of all parliamentary parties, the 'anti-system' AfD has the highest share of public service employees in its ranks. With these backgrounds, which are very different from those of representatives of previous right wing extremists parties after 1945 – and also differs from the NSDAP in the Weimar Reichstag (Best et al. 2000) –, the AfD projects itself as a component of a conservative coalition with established right wing or center right parties.

At the level of electorates, a recent Eurobarometer survey has unexpectedly shown that support for the EU has reached its highest level for 35 years among European citizens (Eurobarometer 2018). This is an indication that the present populist surge will not necessarily evolve into a traditional nationalism, involving serious conflicts between the EU member states, but it could become the starting point for pan-European nationalism – the ideology of 'Fortress Europe' – set against a seemingly hostile and threatening outside world. This evokes, however, memories of a deeply tainted past: The term 'Fortress Europe' was originally coined by Goebbel's propaganda ministry in the final phase of WWII in order to mobilize European support for the Nazi war machine in its fight against the Soviet Union.

Both developments would dramatically change 'Western Democracy'. They would also fit into the challenge-response concept of political elites' change in that a new external challenge is replacing the 'legitimacy challenge' as the prime mover of elite transformation. We suggest calling it the '*globalization challenge,*' which is resulting from the threats – perceived or real – posed to the level of wealth, individual freedom and collective identities prevalent in western democracies by global asymmetries and disparities in demographic development, economic performance, social inequality and collective norms. Western democracies' responses to this challenge might be exclusion, oppression and walling-off.

It seems obvious, therefore, that the integration of populist parties by extending the spectrum of the elite consensus could be a preferable response of established representative elites. This would involve the inclusion of populists into established elite settings, thereby corrupting them with the prospect of becoming insiders. Established elites should be aware, however, that this could entail the risk of compromising and ultimately losing the universalistic basis of their previous consensus. Unfortunately, German history provides an example of such an attempt at including an outsider going horribly wrong (Struve 1973). It would also mean embracing policies that are incompatible with general humanitarian norms and the unveiling of an unsavory side of democracy – ugly, but not unfamiliar since the days of its Athenian beginnings (Cartledge 2016).

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